

House Administration Subcommittee on Oversight  
Hearing on “Use of ‘Robocalls’ in Federal Campaigns”  
December 6, 2007

Statement of Congressman Jason Altmire

The 2006 election saw unscrupulous groups use automated political “robocalls” to intentionally harass, deceive, and infuriate voters in an attempt to subvert the democratic process. News reports contained stories of calls made in the middle of the night, calls containing deliberately misleading information, and calls that repeatedly redialed if the recipient did not listen to the entire message.

Many of my constituents and thousands of Americans expressed outrage and frustration with the incessant phone calls that marred the weeks prior to Election Day. Dinner time for many families was often interrupted by pre-recorded messages promoting one candidate over another, tarnishing a candidate’s character or credibility, or simply annoying those homeowners who do not have caller ID.

Technology has allowed campaigns to quickly and inexpensively use this medium to communicate with voters. Many believe that robocalls are effective in increasing voter turnout. Unfortunately, for many voters, enough is enough and they are starting to respond to them by choosing instead to stay at home on Election Day due to their frustration with the incessant robocalls.

Fortunately, we already have a tool at our disposal to curtail those who abuse automated calls to influence voters: the National Do-Not-Call Registry. Since its inception in 2003, the Registry has proven extremely popular with Americans who wish to opt out of receiving calls from unwanted telemarketers with over 107 million phone numbers added through June 2006.

With this in mind, I introduced the Freedom from Automated Political Calls Act (H.R. 372) to address the proliferation of automated political calls. My legislation would add automated calls from or on behalf of political organizations to the Registry and allow our constituents to opt not to receive political robocalls.

H.R. 372 does not prohibit automated political phone calls, but it does give Americans the right to choose not to receive them, just as they would any other solicitation. Why should political campaigns be specifically carved out from the do-not-call list when businesses across the country are required to abide by it?

Further, H.R. 372 would not affect a candidate or his or her campaign's ability to make live, person-to-person phone calls to voters.

Some concerns have been raised about whether H.R. 372 is intended to preclude members from holding tele-town halls or research firms from conducting surveys and polls. I want to reassure them that this is not the intention of my bill. I am open to amending the language in my bill to protect the legitimate use of automated phone calls, and welcome anyone who wishes to discuss this with me further.

State Legislatures from across the country are calling for and acting to reform their state do-not-call lists. It's time for Congress to take action and provide voters with a choice on whether or not to receive political robocalls.

I believe that H.R. 372 would be an effective approach to dealing with robocalls. At the same time, it is important to identify and deter the most damaging and abusive tactics that involve the use of robocalls. I encourage efforts that would effectively deter those practices and punish those who commit them.

Thank you, Chairwoman Lofgren, for the opportunity to testify here today. I appreciate your attention to this issue, as well as for your introduction of legislation to penalize those who use robocalls to make late night calls, mislead voters, and fail to even disclose who they are. I hope to be able to work with you as you move forward on your efforts to protect the sanctity of one's home from dinner time interruptions, harassment, deception, and the abuse of political robocalls.